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Source: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Autumn 2008), pp. 74–77

Published by: [University of California Press](#) on behalf of the [Institute for Palestine Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jps.2008.38.1.74>

Accessed: 23/07/2013 15:50

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REMEMBERING MAHMUD DARWISH (1941–2008)

RASHID KHALIDI

AN AURA OF INFINITE SADNESS seemed to attach to Mahmud Darwish over the nearly four decades I knew him. In spite of his rapier wit, jovial affect, and sociable nature, he always carried himself with a reserve that seemed to bespeak an inner sorrow, as if he perceived wrenching tragedies deeper than the rest of us could fathom. His poetry, especially when he recited it, conveyed the same sense of seeing the entire course of the inexorable fate of his people, even as his words gave voice to the indomitable spirit of ordinary Palestinians. This deep wisdom was not derived from his close brushes with death at the time of his two previous heart operations, in 1984 and 1998; the same knowing, worldly awareness of human mortality and frailty was there much earlier, even in the defiant, engaged poems he recited to rapturous crowds when he first achieved fame and renown throughout the Arab world in the 1970s and early 1980s. But Darwish knew that death pursued him, and often wrote about it in his poetry. In the last poem he ever recited publicly, at Arles in July 2008, “A Prepared Scenario,” he described how he and his enemy were trapped in a hole, and matter-of-factly concluded, “It is up to another poet to follow this scenario to its end.”*

Mahmud Darwish was one of the finest poets of his entire generation—in Palestine certainly, possibly in the Arab world, and perhaps even beyond. In part this was because he incarnated in his personal itinerary all the many dimensions of the Palestinian experience, to which he gave such eloquent voice. Born in Mandate Palestine, Darwish experienced expulsion, flight, and the loss of his home as a small child. He grew up in Galilee as an “internal refugee” living in a village next door to his destroyed natal village of al-Birwa, under the harsh military rule imposed for nearly two decades on the Palestinians inside Israel. His education included a spell in an Israeli prison—that training ground of Palestinian militants and intellectuals—where he wrote one of his most famous poems, “Sajjil ana ‘arabi” (“Record! I Am an Arab”); published in English under the title “Identity Card”). He then experienced exile, notably for over ten years in Beirut when the PLO was located there.

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*“Senario jahiz,” *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 22 July 2008.

Journal of Palestine Studies Vol. XXXVIII, No. 1 (Autumn 2008), pp. 74–77 ISSN: 0377-919X; electronic ISSN: 1533-8614.
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Darwish was perhaps the most important single figure during the seminal period of the reconstruction of the Palestinian national imagination, contributing not only with his poetry but also by editing the PLO Research Center's review, *Shu'un Filastiniyya* (Palestinian Affairs). With the expulsion of the PLO from Beirut in 1982, Darwish went into an even more extended exile. He eventually was allowed by Israel to reside in Ramallah, where he experienced both occupation and ambivalence about the governance of the Palestinian Authority, whose creation drove him permanently to eschew direct involvement in politics. Darwish resigned from the PLO Executive Committee in 1993.

Never truly at home anywhere—whether in Beirut before 1982, or in Ramallah, Amman, or Paris after that—and never bound by material or personal ties, Darwish led a peripatetic existence until death finally found him in, of all places, Houston, Texas, where his overburdened heart finally gave out after a third major heart operation. In this unexpected end, in this incongruous place, Darwish further incarnated the peculiar and surreal ongoing odyssey of the Palestinian people.

While unique in many respects, Mahmud Darwish was only one of several major intellectual and cultural leaders from the “inside”—Palestinians who grew up in the Arab communities incorporated against their will into Israel in 1948—who connected with their countrymen and women of the diaspora to forge a new mode of Palestinian identity within the framework of the PLO at a crucial period in Palestinian cultural and intellectual life. These included figures like Sabri Jiryis, Elias Shoufani, and Habib Qahwaji, who wrote, built institutions, served in politics, and brought a unique perspective drawn from their intimate personal experience of Israeli society to intellectual circles in the Palestinian diaspora and the larger Arab world. Others who remained inside Israel, like Emile Habibi, Tawfiq Zayyad, and Samih al-Qasim, played an analogous role.

Despite similarities with others who had grown up under Israeli rule, Darwish held a unique place on the cultural and political levels. Because he was not only a respected intellectual but also a major cultural and artistic figure, Darwish retained the universal admiration of ordinary Palestinians, who related to his simple, unadorned style. He was loved and revered for his poetry, which touched a profound chord in the hearts of people in Palestine and much farther afield. Many of his poems were set to music by Marcel Khalife and others. At the same time, by virtue of his intelligence, his eloquence, and the vast popular audience he commanded, Mahmud Darwish was able to speak directly and as an equal to the Palestinian political leadership (not that they always had the good sense to listen to him, or to others from outside their ranks who tried to reason with them).

This unique situation explains Darwish's central role, together with Edward Said and several others, in the drafting of the Palestinian Declaration of Independence in 1988. This document presented a framework for the historic compromise between the Palestinian and Israeli peoples first publicly enunciated by Walid Khalidi a decade earlier in his *Foreign Affairs* article, “Thinking

the Unthinkable.”* The declaration deserves greater attention than it has received. It documents significant political evolution inasmuch as this call on behalf of the highest Palestinian representative body for a two-state solution—which would have given Israel the lion’s share of Palestine—was produced only four decades after the earthquake that shattered the country’s Arab society and turned the majority of Palestinians into penniless refugees. While intellectual and political leaders who earlier elaborated the broad principles that this document incarnates received most of the credit for it, its form, a large part of its content, and its vision flowed from the pen of Mahmud Darwish. For this feat alone, he will deserve to be remembered as one of the fathers of his country, if and when Palestine ever sees the light of day as an independent state.

The passing of Mahmud Darwish, however, may mark the end of an era during which Palestinian aspirations evolved from the narrow focus on survival and steadfastness in the bitter new post-Nakba world after 1948, and from nostalgia for a return to an imagined idyllic existence before that traumatic rupture, and toward an increasingly broad-minded and tolerant humanistic approach to a resolution of the conflict, and toward the Israelis. The high point of that era was the Algiers Palestinian National Council meeting of 1988, at which the Declaration of Independence that Darwish played such a large role in drafting was adopted. This document represented a Palestinian consensus on offering a generous (many Palestinians felt overly generous) compromise that granted the historic foe most of the land of Palestine and many of its gains at the expense of the Palestinian people in return for a modicum of recognition, reciprocity, and equity in burdens and rights.

In the two decades since the Algiers meeting, this offer has been callously ignored, dismissed, and belittled in turn by an Israeli political and security elite that was ever surer of its ability to get whatever it wanted from the Palestinians through the unrelenting application of force, given the unstinting and constantly growing support of the world’s sole superpower. Even as successive Israeli governments spurned the historic compromise he played a part in fashioning, Mahmud Darwish continued to view the Israeli people as fully human and as fully entitled to consideration and sympathy as his own people. His perspective, like that of his friend Edward Said, always remained broad and humanistic. Theirs was a vision of inclusiveness, and a fine sense of the possibility of a transformation for the better of the abnormal situation in which both peoples have been living for six decades (with the Palestinians far worse off than the Israelis). This humane and tolerant vision fashioned by a broad cohort of intellectuals and artists who reshaped the Palestinian national imagination touched an entire generation of younger Palestinians, informed and broadened their outlook, and even affected the calculations of the adept politicians who had emerged in the 1960s to lead the PLO.

*“Thinking the Unthinkable: A Sovereign Palestinian State,” *Foreign Affairs* 56, no. 4 (July 1978), pp. 695–713.

Today, the ablest of those political leaders have passed on: Yasir Arafat, George Habash, Salah Khalaf, Khalil al-Wazir, Haydar 'Abd al-Shafi, Mamdouh Nofal, and others. At the same time, several members of an influential generation of Palestinian intellectuals and cultural figures have also disappeared. With them may have disappeared the possibility of this form of historic compromise with the Israelis over Palestine, based on a partition of the land both peoples consider their own, however unjust any such Solomonic judgment would necessarily be.

Perhaps Mahmud Darwish's sadness derived from his intuitive understanding that the vision for the future that he and others did so much to elaborate and to establish as the shared vision of the Palestinian people would not truly be accepted by those to whom it was so generously offered. Perhaps he understood that an entirely new vision of how to share one land between two peoples, to be elaborated by a new generation, was needed. Perhaps he knew this from the beginning, with his acute sense of the meaning of political words, which was at the core of so much of his poetry, and with his sharp understanding of Israeli domestic politics. And perhaps he only realized it toward the end.

If the latter is the case, Mahmud Darwish may have died not only from complications after heart surgery, but also from a broken heart. For surely this visionary poet understood how much suffering the rejection of this vision and the consequent fashioning and implementation of a new one would necessarily entail for all concerned, and how long and complex that process might be, notwithstanding the glib assurances of all of those—on all sides—who have spurned it. Two enemies stuck together in a hole, victim and victimizer, with no idea of the scenario necessary to get them out of it: His last poem provided the perfect metaphor for the situation he saw so clearly.